

### Summary of the report

## Organised Interests in the European Union Enhancing or Endangering Democracy and Efficiency?

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Few contest the fact today that the EU suffers from a democratic deficit. There is, however, considerable disagreement about what the best solution is to this problem. The most obvious way out would be to strengthen the representative channels in Europe, mainly by giving more powers to the European Parliament. Although the development over time has gone in that direction, the course has proved to be a difficult way forward. Instead, other scholars have argued that the EU can only be democratically justified through its member states. By strengthening procedures for parliamentary scrutiny of governments, and by providing democratic accountability through general elections in each member state the opportunity is given to hold European decision-makers to account.

But there is also a third solution to the problem that has recently mushroomed in the debate about Europe's future. This idea is based on the involvement of interest groups and civil society organisations (CSOs) in EU policy-making, which is thought to promote the democratic credentials of the Union. Although by no means new – organised interests have since the beginning of integration been widely represented at the EU-level – this solution has recently appeared in a new guise. Civil society is even considered as a third form of representation in the Union, in addition to representation via political parties in the European Parliament, and national governments in the Council of Ministers and the European Council.

Scholars remain divided, however, in their assessment of concrete reforms in this direction at the European level. In the view of one camp in this debate, a greater involvement on the part of representatives of interest groups and civil society is an effective means for enhancing the democratic quality of EU policies and increasing the problem-

solving capacity of the Union. According to the opposite camp, however, the ongoing attempts at establishing new procedures for participation and deliberation at the European level serve sooner to deepen than to alleviate the Union's problems with democracy and efficiency. However, the debate is lacking in systematic empirical studies of the relative strengths and weaknesses of the arguments put by the two sides.

The aim of this report, accordingly, is to offer an empirically well-grounded answer to the vital question of whether recent governance reforms in the Union provide a viable solution to the Union's democratic problems. The report assesses whether increased participation from civil society organisations does make EU policy-making more democratic and legitimate. Additionally, it examines whether increased participation of associations come at the expense of the EU's ability to reach efficient solutions to common problems.

The report departs from a case heralded by many as a blue print for participatory law-making, that is, the introduction of the new regulatory system for chemicals called REACH. As the point of departure, we use Robert Dahl's well-known definition of a fully democratic procedure when analysing the REACH decision process. The empirical lessons drawn are based on data from a unique expert survey, in which more than 600 respondents from over 40 countries took part.

Taken together, the results presented in this report paint a rather positive picture of the governance experiment conducted in the REACH case. Overall, the REACH process proved to be reasonably open and inclusive, and most of the relevant actors had at least some opportunity to make

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*The full report is available at [www.sieps.se](http://www.sieps.se)*

their voices heard and to influence the outcome. Thus, reinforcing the interest-based channel may provide citizens with a better means for affecting EU policy, and accordingly improve democratic representation. However, the results also suggest that strengthening the interest-based channel may have the effect of increasing political inequality, since some interest groups have been shown to stand a somewhat better chance of influencing policy than others. Consequently, a greater reliance on participatory governance within the Union can be expected to have contradictory effects on the other elements of democratic representation.

Additionally, there is clear evidence for a positive relationship between input and output legitimacy in this case. Respondents who held the quality of the decision-making process in higher regard were more likely to view the re-

sulting outcome as efficient. Contrary to the claims of certain critics of participatory governance, then, it seems to be possible – at least under certain conditions – to promote broad participation and access to information without undermining the Union’s problem-solving capacity.

The results in this report, however, have been built solely on a single case study, and examined only the interest-based channel of representation in this particular case. But the overall effect of strengthening the interest-based channel depends also on how increased opportunities for stakeholder participation and deliberation affect the territorial and electoral channels. The modest conclusion drawn, therefore, is that participatory governance reforms may not be the solution to the EU’s legitimacy crisis, but a proper use of it can help reduce the breadth and depth of the crisis.